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PROF. PARKINSON VOICES TART VIEWS ON BUREAUCRACY

C. Northcote Parkinson is an historian who is attempting to deflate bureaucracy whether it be in government or business.

His weapons are a devastating wit and satire on the growth of organizations, chiefly the management layer.

The Raffles professor of history at the University of Malaya is author of "Parkinson's Law" which holds that the number of people in any working group increases regardless of the amount of work to be done.

He spoke to a score of Federal Government's top career officials at an executive development conference sponsored by Brookings Institution. The officials were alternately laughing and smarting at the verbal jabs of the Britisher. For a time they weren't quite sure if he was serious.

But Parkinson emphasized that he was deadly serious in his belief of the "law" he founded. He said he was more convinced than ever of his theory following his writings on the subject. People from all over the world had written him, he related, to ask, "How did you know about our organization?" In fact, he said his book had understated the case and that the actual annual staff increase was nearer seven per cent a year instead of his original and lower estimate.

A wartime experience and his knowledge of history inspired Parkinson to evolve the "law." During World War II, he related, he was serving at a headquarters which he assured his listeners had nothing whatever to do with winning the war.

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His commanding officer took leave, he said, and the work dropped twenty-five per cent; the second and third in command became ill and the work continued to decline.

"I was a major and finally I was left in command," he said, "and we were soon able to get our work done within an hour after breakfast."

Parkinson charged that a weakness of administrators is the self-made work they resort to to justify their jobs.

"Administrators keep busy, very busy," he said, "but they spend most of their time writing memos, and criticizing one another's English, punctuation, etc."

The historian said he recently visited a boys' school and was shown a "mounting pyramid" of administrative offices. Finally, he related, he asked the president: "When will you have all administrative offices and no school at all?"

"A major problem of the democracies," he said, "was the tendency for its leaders to grow too old and to frustrate and discourage potential leaders under them."

He suggested two remedies. First, send the elderly leaders on long air trips to conferences all over the world, and secondly, require them to fill out piles of questionnaires and forms.

Parkinson said he found bureaucracy in business in this country as bad or worse as that in government.

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